

Sounds '76

Ron Kroese

Hejira

Joni Mitchell **Asylum Records**
What will it take to make Joni Mitchell happy? When will the clouds finally stop getting in the way? Despite universal critical acclaim and eight gold albums, her search for a lasting and meaningful love and self-fulfillment dominates her new album, "Hejira," as it has most of her previous work.

The title, of course, is taken from the prophet Mohammed's flight in 622 from Mecca to Medina — the word has come to mean any exodus from a bad situation. In Mitchell's case, the flight apparently is from a love or series of loves that didn't work out. As the title to one of the songs "Refuge of the Roads," indicates, she's become "a prisoner of the highway . . . running to lose the blues."

Nearly every song on "Hejira" is drawn from some experience from her life on the road. The road, and the continual search it signifies, has become a haven since her experiences in settling down with love have left her repeatedly disappointed and disillusioned. On the album she refers again and again to her dissatisfaction in love: on "Amelia," a tribute to fellow free spirit Amelia Earhart and one of the strongest songs on the album, she sings, "Maybe I've never really loved/I guess that is the truth/I've spent my whole life in clouds at icy altitudes;" on "Song for Sharon" she confesses, "But I'm a fool when love's at stake/Because I can't conceal emotion/What I'm feeling is always written in my face . . ."

On "Hejira" Mitchell is stating in her own extremely personal and poetic way that perfect love — the ideal — cannot be, or at least has not been, found. However, in the spirit of a true romantic, when she doesn't succumb to self-pity and lassitude, she finds comfort in the only place she can — in the pursuit of the ideal, in the constant change and fleeting pleasures of the road. Despite repeated bouts with disappointment, the very fact that she is still searching reveals her ultimate optimism.

While her dissatisfaction causes her some pain, the irritation yields pearls of rarest poetic beauty. She is rock's finest woman songwriter and perhaps its finest poet. Mitchell's lyrics, more than those of any other pop writer, can

stand alone without the music. In fact, the music seems increasingly less connected to the often-lengthy and complex lyrics. That is particularly true of "Hejira," where on most songs she is backed only by her own electric rhythm guitar, a lead guitar and bass or vibes — no percussion and more noticeably, no piano, her main instrument on most earlier albums.

This lack of melodies and traditional rock arrangements works well for her. Although she dropped the elaborate instrumentation and experimental jazz of her previous and generally less accessible album, "The Hissing of Summer Lawns," the light jazz sounds on "Hejira" provides a proper backdrop for her free-roving verse rife with striking images. The musical highlight on the album is provided by Jaco Pastorius, a little-known but respected European vanguard jazz bassist (He released a fine jazz album on Epic Records earlier this year). He shares with a few other modern bassists, Stanley Clarke and Charlie Haden come immediately to mind, the ability to make the electric bass as expressive as the electric guitar.

It's taken nine albums for Joni Mitchell to lure me into her ardent fold. I considered her early albums too self-centered in subject matter and her voice usually too shrill to be enjoyable. Unless my ears have altered with age, her voice has mellowed and is now much richer in tone, and after years of listening to music dominated by posers and actors, I've grown to appreciate the honesty and intimacy of her lyrics.

Unlike most pop artists, Mitchell demands much from her listeners. Her

lyrics must be carefully heard and the subtleties of music require more than casual listening if Mitchell is to weave her spell. But if you choose to delve into her, Joni Mitchell offers so much.

Year of the Cat

Al Stewart

Janus Records

This one almost got by me. "Year of the Cat" came out a couple months ago. I remember playing it once, not paying much attention to it and putting it aside. Then last week I heard the mysterious and alluring "On the



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